



## American Cinematic Form

Richard L. Kenney

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must be done: systems that start from people spontaneously organizing themselves in some sort of meaningful groups, and then *not* alienating their power to some sort of more "representative" higher levels—just preserving their own communal power. I think the new means of communication that we have in the media, in this electronic world, enable us to live in our small ethnic groups, or very specific groups, yet being able to communicate all over the globe without the necessity of having this type of power structure to mediate in our names. I believe in a world without states, a world without politicians, without these political structures representing alienated power.

R.S.: A kind of loosely structured anarchy?

D.M.: No, a kind of well organized anarchy! I think the failure of world communism to do anything meaningful is that it built some sort of very militant, Christian-style militancy of fighting for a paradise that will come for our grandchildren, and for them we must put ourselves through the fire; and this leads to terrible things, like millions of people put in concentration camps by their own comrades, and many of them in the camps even believing that the camps were good for the system. You remember that many people died shouting "Long live Stalin!" even when they were being killed on Stalin's orders. This self-sacrificing revolutionism is the same kind of religious, Judeo-Christian kind of bullshit.

RICHARD L. KENNEY

## American Cinematic Form

*When people think to praise a work by calling it art, they often also mean to set it off into a safe, "cultural" category where it can't do any harm. Even in a rambunctiously commercial art like film, distinctions between life and art have been glib and unexamined. The following article makes some startling proposals about these basic assumptions, and suggests some particularly American aspects of the search for new cinematic forms.*

### 1 America

"Listen to the States asserting: 'The hour has struck! Americans shall be American. The USA is now grown up artistically. It is time we ceased to hang on to the skirts of Europe, or to behave like schoolboys let loose from European schoolmasters.'" That is D. H. Lawrence, the European, opening his *Studies in Classic American Literature*. America has evolved a literature,

created it and perceived it according to the peculiarities of the North American continent, and the special forms of the life there. With a new cinema in Europe and intimations of one here, now the American will try to discover his original relation to film. I am interested in the forms which will define that relation.

The question, Would the American find an original relation to literature? was met by the

father Benjamin Franklin, the revolutionary of 1776. James M. Cox sees autobiography as the self-inventive, self-discovering creative art, the form that can stand for the revolution.

For before Franklin there was no American literature; there was only English Colonial literature. With Franklin came consciousness, total consciousness in the form of autobiography—a history of a self-made life written by the man who made it.<sup>1</sup>

Father Franklin made the beginning of American literature simultaneous with his making of the revolution; there is a formal relation between the two events; there is in that double creation a model hypothesis for the modern solution: in times of greatest stress and revolution, non-fictional modes supercede fictional ones. Cox writes:

For when politics and history become dominant realities for the imagination, then the traditional prose forms of the essay and the autobiography both gain and attract power and the more overtly “literary” forms of prose fiction—the novel and the short story—are likely to be threatened and impoverished. As such a process takes place—as politics and history tend to claim dominion over the imagination—then the literary imagination tends to respond by denying the generic distinctions which are both powerful and convenient categories in periods of stability and peace.

Revolution in the late 1700’s fused the biographical and autobiographical styles of Franklin, Rousseau, and Boswell. Twentieth-century revolution gives us Mailer, and Malcolm X, and Cleaver: essays, autobiographies, chronicles, arts of non-fiction.

The questions are very fundamental: What are the cinematic forms, the American forms, the American generative energies of creation and perception? And to begin even more fundamentally: What “generic distinctions” can still classify the varieties of human creation, within a society that is experiencing cultural and political revolution? What is fiction?

## 2 Connections

Art is human creation: a human event by which found objects are connected together to form a composition. The composition may be a communication to men or gods, a description and criticism of new or old or timeless things, abstract or representative, accessible or inaccessible to the mob, a noncommunicative statement unto itself, a whim, an idea never objectified, an object never explained: but the composition is a metaphor for some aspect of what it means to be human.

This is the formal vision of art that the twentieth century has shaped, and must face in its fullest extension. This is not to try to violate the bounds of category until the word “art” is swollen out of all usefulness in the English language. Simply, it is to point out that bounds, separating “art” from other levels of human creation, cannot be easily drawn.

In older days, “art” was perhaps more readily recognized; a play of Shakespeare or a sculpture of Michelangelo was immediately named “art” for its craftsmanship; later it would be named “masterpiece” for its vision. Pure abstraction made the problem more difficult. At first, society generally refused to call simple optical or pop abstractions “art,” because of an apparent poverty of craftsmanship (anybody can do *that!*)—until the artist was proven to be a man of real vision. Metaphors that in some sense describe what it means to be human can be extracted from nearly any piece of created or found art, depending on the amount of creative perception an audience is willing to exert. Most people are defensive enough to avoid being caught creatively perceiving things that have not received the stamp of excellence, of “vision.” That stamp comes from collectors, galleries, critics, extraordinary and powerful individuals whose sponsorship is a critical guarantee. Most people listen for that appraisal, reserving themselves; because they have all seen where hasty judgments like “Anyone can do *that!*” or questions like “Is it *art?*” can lead. We live in a time when the artist is often freed from the critical judgment of a wide public; a time when formal artistic canons are thought to be pedantic.

Two corollaries: symbolic or associational content of a work cannot be measured wholly in terms of the artist's intention; and artistic value cannot be assessed only in terms of communication. The metaphorical significance of any phenomenon depends upon the creative will of the perceiver to make connections; the judgment of whether too much or too little has been "read into" a work rests not in the sheer number of "symbols" an artist manages to pack into his work, but instead upon the consistency and force of his human vision.

Underlying the greatness of the Mona Lisa's smile is the certainty that Leonardo could never have enumerated the things it "means," all the human qualities it suggests. Some of the greatest literary artists of this century, such as Joyce and Faulkner, have often followed the aloof convention of neglecting to enter into critical debates and controversy surrounding their work. A no-risk policy for themselves, it also invites their readers to discover a private and personal relation to the art.

The form of the event always gives better clues to its nature than does preconceived aesthetic theory. In the Nevada desert, Walter de Maria constructed two parallel lines in chalk, twelve feet apart, running for a full mile.<sup>2</sup> In Kansas, Truman Capote discovered a murder story, which he investigated exhaustively, and described in his book in great detail. One work was all personality and less communication; the other was all communication and less personality. Is it illuminating to pin down de Maria's effort as "sculpture," "graphics," "concept," or maybe chalk pastel, or geometry? Describing *In Cold Blood* as "journalism" inclines us to speculate on its sale as a "novel"; yet calling it a novel does not increase our understanding of what it really is. What are these things, the parallel lines and the murder history? Are they "art"? If creation is apparent, and the man calls it art, in the twentieth century, it is a waste of time to contradict. It is a minor point.

With his Campbell soup canvases, Warhol follows Joyce in using commonplace events in art; while artists like Heizer, Smithson, and Oppenheim, with their "earthworks," stretch the definitions of sculpture. There has been resis-

tance to their work. Most people have assumed that didactic art represents the one class of "artificial" events most legitimately crossed with events in the living world. The confusion of literature with new journalism, or theater with guerrilla theater, or visual art with propaganda poster design—these things have seemed less of an affront to the popular conception of art than the confusion of supermarket labels with painting, or natural landscapes with sculpture. But didacticism is not the primary point of crossing between artistic creativity and real-life creativity. It is much more a matter of formal pattern and design. For those who mistrust Warhol and other modern plastic innovators, this point can be illustrated as well by very ancient traditional Japanese art forms like haiku poetry, rock gardening, and tea ceremony. At the surface, these things appear to be spontaneous natural occurrences, rather than self-conscious "creations"; simple, spare, exquisitely refined, more than creations, they are discoveries.

Creation involves a discovery of form. Human minds do little more than lace together webs of connections, associations between the things they see, and see done, and do themselves. The child or the painter may notice that December birches resemble the whitened hands of a grandmother. This does not mean, in a painting or a Bergman film, that the coal-etched trees stand for grandmothers, but perhaps for all autumnal fleshless things. A philosopher takes those connections, and hones them from visual to linguistic metaphors, from impressionistic to analytic modes. That is another composition. Dennis Hopper one day made the connection between horseshoes and motorcycle tires, and for fun he juxtaposed the shoeing of a horse with the changing of a tire in *Easy Rider*. Do connections chain out from that single visual linkage? Horses to motorcycles, the old dirt farmer to the young adventurers, the land to the road, one culture to another? To say that they are all "really there," and more, and to speak of intention, is to be heavyhanded. Perhaps Hopper was heavyhanded; but to understand that the groups of connections can simply be made, by the eyes or the brain, is to begin to understand composition.

Artistic composition is a *bricolage*\* of found objects. Single aspects of men and nature are found objects, history is full of found objects. Creative humans sense the objects, and connect them together in the associations of their experience, making compositions from them; paintings, sculptures, ordered lives and autobiographies, wars, religions, movies. Small compositions describe and criticize and constitute larger compositions. Creation is connective and compositional. The essence of all creation is similar; only the forms vary.

Just as the boundary between "noncommunicative art" and spontaneous human "life" has become difficult to hold, so has the boundary between "communicative art" and "criticism."

### 3 Guernica

The artistic chain of "Guernica" provides a good illustration of the problems, without yet engaging peculiarly American circumstances. Everyone is familiar with Picasso's masterpiece, *Guernica*. Its subject is the fascist destruction of the Basque capital, on April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War. Its abstracted themes involve human suffering, the bestiality of war and total war, the horror. Robert Flaherty had begun to make some filmed studies of the painting, now put together and available for viewing through the Museum of Modern Art. This film explores the surface of the work carefully with the emotion of expressive movement from detail to detail. Alain Resnais made a film entitled *Guernica*. This piece makes use of newsreel footage, photographs, the master painting, and other canvases and sketchwork and sculptural work of Picasso. Finally, there has been literature of criticism on the painting, the two films, and the bombing itself.

The initial work was the German piece. It was dramatic in form, executed by a company of professional craftsmen, an event begun and completed through a single space of time, a complex and carefully orchestrated military composition. It was an experimental work: the total destruction of a human community by aerial bombardment, a political and social experiment in terror and subjugation. It spoke eloquently of human suffering and of the bestiality of total war.

Picasso's creation was fused by the terrible energy inherent in the German event. The painting is on one level a criticism of that event; it says much about the nature of the event; and at the same time it transcends the event to treat universal questions. The destruction of Guernica was recognized as a metaphor. Resnais's film uses Picasso in much the way that Picasso used the Germans. Each bleeds energy from a previous creation. Of the three, Picasso's is the most powerful: Resnais's film is not important, the actual bombing has been largely forgotten by worldwide generations, and "Guernica" is only the name for Picasso's painting.

Flaherty's film is a piece of simple "criticism" which examines the painting alone; any universality achieved is due to the power of Picasso, and not the compositional skill of the film-maker. It is pure communication, similar to a literary review of the painting, or newspaper reportage of the Basque tragedy. It is secondary creation, a literal translation of one medium by another, but no less creation.

The tradition would be to call the German *Guernica* "life," the Picasso and Resnais *Guernica* "art," and the Flaherty *Guernica* "criticism." The distinctions are very shallow. The problem involves the nature of fiction, and that is a problem of form. Tradition might say that life is for real, that art tends toward fictional free play, that criticism is free play purged of its fiction for the sake of clarity and analytic precision. But this view belies a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of fiction, and it embraces many inconsistencies and internal contradictions. Art is so important that city civilians will risk everything to preserve it in times of disaster. Yet the root of the outrage I provoke

\*Claude Levi-Strauss uses this word very effectively in his comparative discussion of myth and science (*The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 1966, pp. 16ff.). The *bricoleur* is a technical handyman whose building materials are odds and ends, found objects. His *bricolage* can thus be considered new creation only in that it represents a reorganization of old component parts.

in comparing the German version of "Guernica" with Picasso's lies in the historical fact that women and children died in that Basque town: the event should be treated with reverence. The ringing implication is that art—gratuitous fiction—is not completely serious. Yet still people will continue to protest that the greatest and most profound expressions of existential horror reside in Wastelands or Lears or Weekends. The critics and poetasters so vacuously name the artist "magician," his craft, "magic": that is purely because they do not believe in magic. True magic is frightening. Precisely because men treat war and religion with fear and reverence, they refuse to recognize these things as the rich "artistic" compositional achievements of entire civilizations. Contradiction is inevitable when men revere the "artistic" creative process, and yet cannot take fiction seriously.

They do not understand fiction. They imagine it to be a narrow artistic category comprised solely of things which are "not true"—as though "fiction" were the opposite of "fact." Instead, one might say it is the *arrangement* of "fact." As a category, it must embrace more than the traditional notions of linear fantasy, sequentially unfolding fabrications, yarns spun and tales told to the eyes, ears, or mind. In a sense, as Cox predicted, this essay represents a "denial of generic distinctions." But not a capricious denial—there is no sense in challenging these categories unless they are no longer helpful in describing the nature of artistic creation. Creation is: making the connections to make the metaphors, building the discovered metaphors into larger metaphorical compositions. Fiction lies in the selection of metaphorical "found objects" and their incorporation into a composition.

Any other viewpoint leads to silly twentieth-century remarks such as "art is shading into life"; and a misunderstanding of the new forms. Consider Godard's *Weekend*. The form is cinema, salvaged "from the scrap heaps," cinema, the freely admitted fiction. The actors self-consciously despise the film, Godard injects signpost frames to break up any audience identification with visual continuity, so the fiction is advertised over and over. The cinematic road is glutted with weekend traffic, the roadsides be-

come a hellish junkyard of gutted automobiles and travelers. The wayfaring protagonists ride each other's backs toward Oinville, meeting Emily Brontë and companion on the way, asking nearly every living person: Are you in a movie? Then come the truly shocking moments: a pig is slaughtered by the ludicrous band of hip revolutionaries. In the audience, we react with disgust. Then we try to imagine why; the road shoulders and human wreckage had been a horrifying vision, but only the killing of a pig had touched our gorge. Was it that the pig was *really* killed, that the fiction was dropped for a moment? Was Godard's art shading into life? And subconsciously, did the monster Godard really kill that poor pig just for a movie? Godard killed that pig because he wanted to. He was making a composition of visual images; he wanted, among other things, the false burning of a fantastic human, and the real slaughter of a real pig. Those images were found objects, discovered by Godard in Saigon immolations, literary historical Brontës, and slaughterhouse routine. Fiction was never suspended; the composition was fiction. Godard selectively placed his metaphorical found objects within the new context of his cinematic fiction. Godard has explored the nature of fiction. His work is not part-fiction-part-fact, but a compositional fiction, a *bricolage* of objects found and connected in Godard's sensing mind, framed and objectified in the secondary creation of celluloid. Cinematic storytellers like Howard Hawks create obvious fictional tales; but Godard's work is no less fiction. Some abbreviation of plot may be used; music may be used, actors or non-actors; street sounds, color, stillness, motion, any of a thousand cinematic forms may be used; Godard even uses language, printed words, long dialogue scenes in which visual power is deliberately suppressed in order to try to liberate the pure power of language. Each of these devices is an object found by Godard, and reincorporated into a new composition, his film. Some metaphors are dragged in from the street, others are structured in the new context to appear fantastic. A funky revolutionary sylvan drummer, an Alice-in-Wonderland Emily Brontë, a twisted goose and slit pig all belong in the

same collage. The composition is fiction.

Proof: imagine if Godard had poleaxed a human being instead of a pig. (With a tinge of fear, the audience knew that that was the extension, that the crazyman Godard might have preferred to have his fat Abhorson kill a real man.) Clearly Godard takes his art seriously. If he had killed a man, in *Weekend*, he would be in prison. If he had killed a man, his composition would have been identical with the German "Guernica." But it is ridiculous to think that the strictures of law in this case define the boundary or division between life and art. It is ridiculous to say that art is that which people pretend to take really seriously, and that life is that which people really take really seriously. Humans make the compositions that they want to make; criticism and law and scholarship drift across the levels of composition, and make their marks.

#### 4 Portraits

Portraiture is like biography, and in the traditional way of thinking, it might have to be considered a "non-fictional" mode. Here is a generic distinction that deserves denial. All the styles of twentieth-century art—impressionism, expressionism, cubism, pure abstraction, to mention several—have been carried to the field of portrait study. Insofar as a line drawing can be considered a portrait, it illustrates the fundamental difficulty in restricting the concept of "fiction." Not a photographic representation, the portrait still may be true to its subject. Here, perhaps more obviously than in the literary genres, it is clear that the question of fiction is really the question of composition, of selectivity, arrangement, proportion, emphasis.

In his discussion of art, Levi-Strauss mentions a delicate portrait of a woman, by Clouet. He writes that Clouet's work is

like Japanese gardens, miniature vehicles and ships in bottles, what in the "bricoleur's" language are called "small-scale models" or "miniatures." Now, the question arises whether the small-scale model or miniature, which is also the "masterpiece" of the journeyman may

not in fact be the universal type of the work of art. (p. 23)

Levi-Strauss contends that it is, if "miniaturization" can be extended to the "reduction of properties" inherent even in larger-than-life size works, when they are compared with real-life subjects (for example: Michelangelo's David is very much simpler than a flesh and blood man, despite the size of the stone; and in this sense there is a reduction of scale.)

The problem of scale is really the problem of selection and composition. "Miniaturization" and "reduction of properties" are only other expressions for "editing."

The *Portrait of Athens* is a whimsical piece of concept-sculpture, in description of the capital of Greece. On August 1, 1969, the curb of Stadiou St. and the guard chain beside it stood in the precise relation that is recorded. The measured relation is reproducible, and represents a tiny fixed portrait; it exists to provide the potential for a recreation of "Athens"—though most of the "found" Athens has been edited out of the composition.

*Medium Cool* is a controversial movie, because it has been misinterpreted as another case of "art shading into life," and misunderstood in terms of fiction unexpectedly intermingling with non-fiction. Clearly there is a contrast between the tale-weaving footage and the "real" riot footage. The cameraman, the nurse, the Appalachian girl and her hubcap-thieving boy all interact by script and choreography to tell a pre-arranged story. Among other things, the story was about the man as camera, and the capacity of man to remain medium cool inside a hot circumstance. Then, in the summer and the city of the filming, the convention riots became ugly. Police choreography and cinematic choreography came together in a single field before the camera, the masses and the actors passed through one another, there was teargas, and on the soundtrack was recorded, "Look out, Haskell, this is real!" The audience drew breath with the sense that fiction had momentarily been suspended; it was like the slaughter of the pig.

(This is a typed copy of the concept-sculpture by J. W. Buchman, entitled "Portrait of Athens," which was originally issued in eight copies, in Athens, in 1969.)

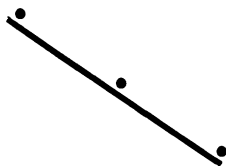
### Portrait of Athens

¾ Buchman 17 May 69

By following these instructions, you can re-create the part of Greece on the east side of Stadiou Street between Omicron Street on the south, and Sina Street on the north, approximately seven and a half blocks south of Omonia Suare and three and a half blocks north of Syntagma Square, Athens.

#### Directions:

1. Imagine a line passing through two points, (1) 35 degrees W of N, and (2) 35 degrees E of S.
2. Indicate a segment of that line equal in length to 6.25 meters.
3. At the midpoint and endpoints of this segment indicate three points to the east of the segment at a distance equal to .5 meters.
4. The line represents the east curb of Stadiou Street.
5. The three points represent the poles that support the chain guarding the sidewalk.



Then people began to criticize the film. The Purist: "Wexler was weak, he couldn't resist including the riot footage, even though he knew it was tangential to his story." Or, the didactic opposite, "If this was supposed to be about *Chicago* (in the reverent tone of *Jerusalem*), why did Wexler have to hang his thing on a mushy plot?" Or in between: "I never mix my modes."

Haskell Wexler didn't mix anything, or pioneer any revolutionary mode. His work is simi-

lar to Mailer's novel-as-history-and-history-as-novel approach. The key to his fiction is in the editing room. He used found objects, and he found Chicago, and he used it selectively. During its creation, his planned cinematic composition collided with the planned dramatic-political composition, and like other directors who use fortuitous events like clear days to shoot in, Haskell Wexler made use of the Chicago demonstrations.

It was not a purely fortuitous accident, of course, that a film such as Wexler's, 1968, roughly about "Involvement," filmed in the very center of America, should coincide with other compositions of similar form. If Wexler were making cowboy films, he would not have been in Chicago, but in southern California deserts where clear days would not be purely fortuitous. Retrospectively, from a formal point of view, it seems almost that *Medium Cool* and *Chicago* had to coincide: perhaps one might have predicted that Wexler would have had the opportunity to film the riots, and crediting him with a modest sense of artistic acumen, that he would surely have taken advantage of it.

One man can be other men's coordinate; smaller compositions can take the measure of larger ones. Wexler did, in fact, make a film about the energies of the convention summer. Very selectively, Wexler shaped a portrait of Chicago.

So far, this essay has largely concerned itself with twentieth-century notions of art, of fiction and composition, and *bricolage*. A general exploration of forms that the American may discover is by itself inadequate without at least a glimpse of the forms of energy available to American creativity.

### 5 Christianity

The Christian myth is perhaps the greatest artistic composition ever shaped by post-classical western civilizations. The Christian cosmogony was both astoundingly successful and supremely beautiful. From conceptual metaphors of universal creation and order, the myth spread over the world in huge, intermeshing webs of



symbol and ritual; and in the service of Christianity, men achieved much of history's greatest triumphs in every medium of artistic expression. But the music and painting and sculpture were only details from the primary masterwork, the Christian myth itself.

The Christian metaphors have provided a storage of almost limitless energy, an almost limitless potential to feed secondary creation on every human level. The energy has been accessible to Europeans, and they have released it in political directions to build empires and subjugate peoples, in warlike directions to destroy those things, in plastic directions to create masterpieces of every variety. In an American direction, the energy was released, and puffed the Spanish sailships to the new continent, and colonized and subjugated South America, and colonized North America, but never fully subjugated it. The energy of Christianity, accessible to Europeans, was never wholly accessible to the American. Now the Christian myth seems nearly exhausted.

Yet one of the finest pieces of cinematic art ever produced, Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, clearly taps a great deal of its power from Christianity. Bergman folds back to medieval times, and rides the metaphors and sucks the apocalyptic vision of the old myth and its proofs, and rides part way to his glory on the swell of remembrance inside the European civilization. The American can never make that film. In *Easy Rider*, the communal prayer for a good crop is thin and dead; in *Midnight Cowboy*, the flashing plastic Christly ensemble that swings back from the bathroom door in the evangelist's scene is pure disease; even the mystic-religious vision of the starchild in *2001* is more Emersonian than Christian, and it draws no power.

But Christianity is only the greatest example of traditional energy denied to American creativity. Bergman in Sweden, Dreyer in Denmark, Cacoyannis in Greece, these directors have tapped sources of historical and mythic energy at a depth that no American can hope to reach.

## 6 Fantasy

The American tried, in his new country, to develop an original relation to the new cinematic art. He understood fiction to be tale-weaving, and in Hollywood he massed the wealth requisite to complicated tale-weaving. Cameras rolled at American accelerations; and in a few decades, Hollywood had churned forth an entire cinematic tradition, its gift to America, the remarkable gift to a traditionless art. By its fathering act, Hollywood became an American force, a formal polestar, and every future filmmaker will have to stand in some relation to it. An enormous body of folklore, history, and fantasy was collected on film; then the Americans weeded the assemblage to discover their characteristic and favorite forms. Tale-weaving fantasy refined itself by natural selection.

One example: Cowboys made the American romance of freedom and violence. Americans have always been a violent people, and they admire the rugged individualist, pioneer spirit, the loner and the open road. Hollywood gave a tradition of Western romance, and now filmmakers try to stand in original relation to it. Their heroes are often outlaws. Clint Eastwood, directed by an Italian, looks back as mirror of the old days. He goes through the motions, and his relation is set in the anti-overstatement of a super-mean; the audience that has been Vietnamized into true disgust for real killing enjoys the Eastwood challenge and triumph: Can he go through another movie without betraying even a trace of humanity? Most of the other movies find their relation by trying to set their heels in a last statement of the open road that has closed. Even in the atmosphere of nostalgic humor, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid cannot live as anachronisms beyond their Southwestern time; neither can the Wild Bunch hope to escape baroque death in an age of Verdun. Cassidy, the Kid, and the Bunch didn't die because they were bad men, or even violent men—they were good men, or good enough, and they each died in an astonishing apocalypse of gunfire, under a far greater violence than they ever would have generated by

themselves. The laws and soldiers and societies had become more dangerous than the outlaws.

The "Guernica" sequence was a European composition. A similar (though much larger) chain of compositional creations has arisen in this country as a result of the central, most brutal, most significant violence that America has created and suffered—the war between the states. The American Civil War defines this country as surely as it defined the newly locomotive and ironclad shape of modern machine warfare. The Civil War synthesized many tensions of the first American century, fused the Union together forever, and released inside the new unity the tensions of the next century. Racial freedom, domestic violence, invasion by the United States army as a political technique. And with this, the first iconography of the South. The South is the violent ground of moral anachronism and racial crime, the perpetuator of redneck violence, and the excuse for even greater violence, visited in return by moralizing Northern power. So the Civil War has given America the iconographic consciousness of "rednecks." We recognize them by the sardonic drawl, by the cokes they drink, the mean provincial glares and the ragged edges that assure us they could never make it in New York. *Easy Rider* is a romance of the open road, no matter if the commune was real, the café scenes played from life, the rednecks true to life. The rednecks may have been "so real," but they were in no way distinguishable from a hundred other stock rednecks trotted out time and again in a hundred books and movies. Rednecks hate niggers and Yankees, and recently they hate hippies; especially they hate racial freedom and change, smart Yankees, and smartass blacks; everyone knows these things. The South and the Civil War are two vital aspects of American form. Rednecks are part of the American formal iconography; they exist for a reason, their consistency is an article of belief.

Lack of artistic and mythic tradition in America, new cinematic art form, Hollywood and a short-term restructured backlog of American fantasy, cowboys and the open road, the Civil

War and the close of the road, rednecks, and the fantastic romance of *Easy Rider*. This sequence of discussion represents an increasingly specific analysis, which can help to illuminate some of the peculiarly American forms that condition our original relation to film.

## 7 Documentary

Traditionally, the forms of fantasy and of documentary seem to stand as polar opposites on the fiction/nonfiction balancing scale. That is a false balance, since each is a fiction by selectivity, a creation by composition. Yet in a very important way, they do represent an opposition. As pointed out, in one of its dominant forms, fantasy is Technicolor film exhibited in urban theaters, a romance of the single self-reliant uncowed American, freely coursing American segments of the open road, underneath the big sky. In its newly dominant form, documentary presentation is live, through private television, displaying men in corporate movement, trapped underneath the weight of a great technology.

The message is that, despite what he may have predicted, man has not been able to free himself by populating his world with steel children; any more than the hopeful old Lear was able to abdicate responsibility for his kingdom. Man is of necessity learning to symbiotically inhabit his machines. The moonshot was only the most blatant example. Armstrong and Aldrin and Collins rode the machine into deep space—not a very specialized machine, but a tiny but entire steel world, which they lived inside instead of on top of. Before they stepped on the surface of the moon, they did not put on spacesuits—they climbed into portable life-support systems. If man has any destiny as explorer, he will have to learn to live in colonial groups inside life-support systems of one or another dimension: in spaceships or bubbles or enclosed cities for consecutive lifetimes. On Buckminster Fuller's Spaceship Earth, in our time, we are not at that stage. The urban environment is more controlled by machines than uncontrolled, however. Architectural encasing machines, nuclear thermostatic machines, com-

putational thinking machines. The rifle is a machine which fills a roughly cylindrical space defined by the straight line from the butt of the stock to the tip of the barrel, and extending several hundred yards forward. Documentary coverage of American political assassinations and American wars is the chronicle of the failure of various American heroes to exist within the space of American war machines. That inhabitation has been death, a failure to adapt to the environment controlled by a machine.

The proliferation of the television mechanism itself represents a kind of corporate artistic achievement. In Medieval Europe, when there was a representation of Christ or a crucifix in every dwelling on the continent, something massive was achieved. Not only the aesthetic shape and iconographic association of the crucifix or the Christ, things artistic in themselves; but beyond these alone, there are connections, made by minds that can see each unit as a reflection of another, each as a section of a huge continental sculptural object. Infrared cameras, photographing only heat, can produce interesting and revealing pictures of human bodies or natural landscapes. If a camera were producing a negative exposed only by the force emitted by the crucifix, an aerial photograph of medieval Europe would show fairly accurate human and geographical boundaries, and embody a unique cultural expressiveness. The same might be said of the huge interconnected continental kinetic wire-sculpture of television in North America. From central points, the corporate artists activate a huge machine sculpture—which is a unique portion of the American habitat. Inside the wire sculpture and its arching electromagnetic connections, spatially caged Americans move.

As an art form, documentary television is appropriate to the new revolutionary age. It is on-the-spot with complex heavy mechanics, worrying at historical events, found objects, trying to create a representational electric likeness. For America, this is self-invention, a selective autobiography on the short order of instant replay, a self-consciousness, inherited like electricity from father Franklin's experiment.

Motion pictures learn from the techniques of television. Budgets and production schedules are streamlined, so that film-makers can match the TV crews, like war correspondents to a cultural revolution, with fashionable up-to-date compositions. Old Hollywood found the objects it wanted to film, and brought them to California and built with them a *bricolage* stage set. New auteurs tend to film their found objects where they find them rather than restaging them at greater expense. Then they reap the stylish benefits of showing film that appears both fantastic and documentary. Since the found objects are not dismantled into such small bits for transcontinental shipping, they are filmed in larger pieces; larger patterns of American formal energy (such as Chicago) appear on film, and closer biographies of America tend to result.

## 8 Science

A revolutionary style has grown with twentieth-century America, with vast energy behind it. In the cinematic art, Americans are finding an original relation to technique, and image, and form. Inhabiting the continental throne of scientific power and missionary technology, Americans are discovering that science has become so specialized and advanced, so macrocosmic and microscopic, that human eyes can no longer perceive the processing of data. Practically everyone believes unquestioningly in  $E=Mc^2$ , in atoms and genes and quantum physics, with no firsthand evidence whatever. Science has become for the layman a matter of pure faith: not so much in the fail-safe capacity of technology to solve all human problems, as in the truth of the scientific description of things. But inasmuch as that is a human description, it is a metaphorical description; and the faith goes beyond this foundation of assumptions and things taken for granted, to embrace what might be called an iconography. The "atom" is not just a pictorial or mathematical metaphor for the smallest unit of an element; it is widely recognized to be the metaphor of an entire age of man. Cancer is not only a cellular condition characterized by uncontrolled growth; it is the disease of the twentieth century both medically

and metaphorically; and anyone of the century can understand it as the disease of the civilization. For America, science represents a cosmogonic myth. Accessible to the American as Christianity never fully was, it provides a reservoir of energy that can generate American art.

Examples of this are everywhere. In film, as in literature, the genre of "science fiction" has left its woolly monsters behind, and gained a new respectability in speculative vision. For example, in *2001: A Space Odyssey* Stanley Kubrick simultaneously explored man in relation to machine, and man in relation to his own spiritual possibility. The alternative potential, death by technology, has also been considered, in such films as *Dr. Strangelove*, *Little Big Man*, and *Catch-22*. For the technical civilization, these films have engaged a fundamental notion of apocalypse, demonstrating the human and his environment to be mutually exclusive.

From the time that John Henry ceased to be a survival-type, the American adaptation to technology has been painful. Perched on the handlebars of a careening driverless motorcycle in *Sherlock Jr.*, Buster Keaton was the wholly uneasy rider who had to predate Hopper and Fonda. If the Civil War was the first semimechanized modern war, the nation survived it on the hairs-breadth level so emblematic of Keaton's own survival among machines like *The General's* steam locomotive.

Keaton's relation to technology was acrobatic. With the parallel evolution of the medium and of America, the relation, man to machine, has necessarily become more organic. What was Jimi Hendrix's relation to his amplifiers? Doesn't the word "organic" limply understate the case for an adjustment, to anyone who has seen Tina Turner nuzzle the *Gimme Shelter* microphone?

In *Sherlock Jr.*, Keaton the projectionist looks with wonder on a film image he imagines to be himself. In *Gimme Shelter*, Jagger the artist looks with dead acceptance on a film image that is himself. *Monterey Pop*, *Woodstock*, *Gimme Shelter*, *Mad Dogs & Englishmen*, these festival rock films illustrate as well as anything else the

full acceptance of technology in art. Here is the striking symbiosis of humans and electronics, the simultaneous realization of human and electronic ecstasies. Unaccommodated thousands come, in the spectacle-tradition of dionysia, having stripped their lives of careful clothes and nonessential gadgetry, but never of the electronics which make the dionysia possible. Here is the culture that begins to feel easy with its machines. The films will follow.

Forms of American art must be phased with the forms of American myth. Engineers control the energy, and establish the modern artistic relation to image and sound; while Americans sense the mechanics of their new habitat, and begin to try to live inside.

#### NOTES

1. "Autobiography and America," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring, 1971, p. 262.
  2. See *When Attitudes Become Form (Works Concepts Processes Situations Information)*, the show catalogue for the exhibition of the same name, Inst. of Contemporary Arts, London, 1969.
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[Editor's Notebook, contd.]

teaches at Stanislaus State College. JAMES ROY MAC-BEAN now teaches film at SF State College. MIKE PROKOSCH studies film at Harvard and has written for *On Film* and the *Crimson*. ROBERTA RUBENSTEIN teaches at American University, Washington. ROBERT SITTON, who has been on the staff of KPFA--Pacifica Radio, teaches media at University Extension, Berkeley. GEORGE STEVENS, JR. is Director of the American Film Institute. MICHAEL WEBB is Film Programming Manager of the AFI Theatre, Washington. GREGG E. WHITMAN is a New York sociologist interested in horror films and the sociology of art. HERMAN G. WEINBERG, historian and critic, is the author of a forthcoming book reconstructing Stroheim's full version of *Greed* via stills (Arno Press).